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ABSTRACT

While scholars--Elbow (1997), Dolphin (1997)--have suggested contract grading, most contracts are initially created from the top down to promote the accountability required by administrators. Additionally, Radican (1997) describes issues of accountability in portfolio assessment. This paper describes the use of contracts along three major assumptions/outcomes: (1) contracts promote individual responsibilities within the framework of differing abilities; (2) contracts promote decentering the teacher as authority; and (3) contracts foster valuable self assessment, allowing for writing which seeks to please the primary audience--the writer. The paper focuses on the issue of the instructor's negotiation of first-year composition as a possible site of teaching and learning, yet also as a site of assessment (with the question of who judges the work or outcomes of a TA/adjunct's first-year composition classroom). It details the writing processes and assessment processes the students developed and implemented. Contains 8 references. (NKA)

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

Title: Student-Created Contracts: Building Responsibility from the Bottom Up
Buzz R. Pounds
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Literature Review

While scholars, Elbow (1997), Dolphin (1997), have suggested contract grading, most contracts are initially created from the top down in order to promote the accountability required by administrators. Additionally, Radican (1997) describes issues of accountability in portfolio assessment regarding quality and quantity. This paper describes the use of contracts along three major assumptions/outcomes:

1) Contracts promote individual responsibilities within the framework of differing abilities.
2) Contracts promote decentering the teacher as authority
3) Contracts foster valuable self-assessment, allowing for writing which seeks to please the primary audience—the writer.

Theoretical Constructs

Using the newer forms of validity proposed by assessment scholars, such as Lee Cronbauch, Samuel Messick, and Pamela Moss which call for a rhetorical and interpretive view of construct validity, this paper looks at student-created contracts as an integral component in making an argument not only for the outcome of the assessment but also in the interpretation of that outcome. The issue I focus on here is my negotiation of first-year composition as a possible site of teaching and learning, yet also as a site of assessment—but my status as a TA/Adjunct gives me little power in the university. Thus, who judges the work or outcomes of my first-year composition classroom?

Cronbach (1988) describes the building of arguments in linking scores and consequences, Messick (1989) indicates the importance of how results are used, Moss (1992) suggests that the consequences of assessments are reviewed. Shepard (1993) goes as far to state " In some cases, if a test has negative effects, it is just as important to ask whether it is better *not* to test" (408). To this end, contracts are intended to minimize the power relationships most responsible for negative attitudes and outcomes of student writing—affectionately described as low motivation, guess what the teacher wants-ism, and the ever popular, "If I have an A, why should I revise?" While this power is not entirely effaced, this minimizing ultimately foregrounds the typical instances of teacher power. Additionally, Strickland and Strickland (1997) recommend student ownership of assessment as it leads to more productive self-assessment and self-evaluation.

Essentials of the Class

In this class, the first semester of a two semester sequence which focuses on writing but generally without a research paper, students were allowed to develop the criteria for assessment, implement the criteria, and then justify the outcomes based on the criteria. These negotiated contracts then become the basis for promoting student responsibility while preserving administrative accountability.

Administrative Constraints

Students were required to write approximately 15 pages in at least four assignments which went through the entire writing process. Attendance was taken, but could not be graded (participation was a possible criterion for assessment).

Some Teacher Constraints

As the contract focused on treating the students individually, I had to "know" where students were in their Process, on which assignment, which draft, etc. Mostly this information had to be gleaned by asking students periodically "So, where are you? Or Wazzup?" Additionally, I asked this of students when they wrote notes to me for my response (generally framed as "How might I help?").

Whole class activities--I did have students read aloud or talk about their work just so I could keep an eye on them, if this sounds oppressive, then perhaps I used this to ivite students to share their progress or learning. I tried two different classroom tasks this semester, which blended into one as the semester progressed. I had students read aloud and/or talk about their writing to the entire class. The first time I had them read aloud, the student on either side of them gave them a brief comment about what was interesting in the selection. When students did not have any writing they were interesting in sharing, they talked about their writing, their writing process, or other writing concerns. From my end of year course evaluation, I found that students preferred talking about their reading over reading aloud.

Giving students ownership over assessment as active stakeholders was important since educational research indicates that student learning increases when motivation is increased. This point remains controversial. Do "we" or do students write more motivation to earn grades or to avoid failure? I think students worked on success knowing they were avoiding failure, but they not work nearly as hard as they could have.

Student Constraints

As the students were able to do more writing that they selected, I found that students wrote more personal essays than I would have required (in fact I had excised them from my one semester course). They also wrote more fiction and poetry than I was comfortable with. I had to ask that students writing poetry provide a reflection in order to help me justify its usefulness.

About the Contracts Themselves

Students had free rein in drawing up contracts—all I asked for were goals, criteria, number and kinds of papers, and grade. Also included at the end was a self-assessment, and throughout the semseter students provided comments for teacher response.

I tried to do this with few if any preconceived notions of what a contract would look like. Because of this, much of the early part of class was discussion and working through writing processes, criteria, and concerns. While many students "lifted" program goals for their personal goals, the class had to also investigate what things like "the entire writing process" meant. Additionally, I had to ask students to discuss and theorize quantity/quality issues.

Stages in the Creation of Contracts

1) So are you really going to give us all As? Answer—I'm not giving anything, you are.
2) So what are my goals? What are my criteria?

Students found it easy to find goals from the syllabus (I allowed them to include these), and as students were under no illusion that they were there for any reason other than they had to be, students found goals difficult to create. I provided a standard (general and

generic rubric for students). In spite of the training many had though the secondary state-wide assessment, few students were really able to match purpose, audience, and criteria.

3) So what would you give this as a grade?

Students occasionally turned in work for my comments. I asked that they give me a brief guideline for response, generally "Tell me how you want me to respond?" Most of these were really vague "Tell me what you think" or really specific "Correct my grammar." By the end of class, they were able to point to specific sections (mostly still introductions and conclusions) or solely on content. During conferences, though, I had to reiterate "If I were the primary audience, but I am not, or if I were grading this, but I am not." Students only partially caught on to the fact that I was trying to neither grade nor direct their papers, but they wanted the direction they were used to.

An earlier panel described students who actively opposed participation in reflection, self-assessment, and group workshops believing that the teacher is the expert. I have a couple of students like that this semester. What I did to deflect this attitude was to describe that I was a trained professional scorer and could easily slip into a bell-shaped curve mentality—they were not interested because they understand that most will get Cs and Ds and Fs are not beyond the realm of possibilty.

In the class I am teaching now, one student basically exemplifies the student attitude I am trying to change. Her first comment in her contract (which can be a paper) was that she wants her contract to count as a paper because why do the work for no grade? No matter how many reassurances, she retains her suspicion that in the end I will grade her. This is the role given me by the institution, which I try my best to deconstruct,

yet, I neither threatened nor rewarded—thus, I could not make only entice students to do x, y, or z. This brings me to attendance.

4) Where is everybody?

So, what happens when you expect students are responsible for showing up but chose to not make them accountable? Attendance slides and the workshops are not very effective. A few students were able to complete the course successfully by remaining motivated and on task independently (about 4) and a few found the freedom to be unsuccessful (about 4).

One issue that remains is one of fairness. Students want it, although I suspect the are more interested in being treated above fairness. I stress that treating students as individuals is not fairness (cf. Lynn Z. Bloom's allusion to Garrison Kielor—all are above average). As a class we had several discussions on fairness. My end of class survey indcated that all students thought the class was fair, even those who prompted the discussion.

5) So how important really is self-reflection?

While I remember discussing self-assessment at the beginning of class, I forgot to include a self-assessment document in the syllabus. This did not mean that that the class did not include one, though. I had students include a brief grade reflection/justification at the end of the course. This assignment combined the worse of reflective memos as well as teacher driven assignments, thus for the future I have included them in the syllabus and will explain that they are more than just grade justifications.

Contracts:

Successes: Although students took a bit of time to figure out that they were in control of their assignments, students were willing to write several pieces in various

modes, giving the writings great diversity of subject matter and style. Students were conscientious about spreading out the workload throughout the semester as well as tying to provide new work for group review on a regular basis. One common paper was a writing inventory which asked about what produces success for the student as a writer (from a survey by Susan Tchudi); the contract was the only other common paper. I have since combined them.

Concerns: While I intellectually understood that attendance might be a problem, I discovered that poor attendance affected me at a deeper, more visceral level. Results show that overall attendance for the semester was 70%, but this roughly corresponds to 90% for the first half averaged in with 50% for the second half. What made this more disturbing was that at least one group was rendered less effective by the lack of attendance. This group choose to have other members assess their writing and as the others did not, the students who attended regularly felt "cheated."

This "cheated" feeling was one of those questions of the contracts. While early in the semester the students had that feeling of "Is he really going to let us get all As," the students toward the end of the semester were wondering what would happen to those who did not fulfill their contracts (at worst) or who made a last ditch attempt to turn them in (at best). The parable of the laborers only briefly consoled them, and I tried to focus the students on the benefits they received by regular attendance and workshopping.

Two additional questions remain.

1) What about broken contracts. Four students "bailed" and did not turn in work. Of the remaining 22, all fulfilled the quantity essentials while quality was a bit less demonstrated. *But*, the qualtiy was no worse than what I have seen for

comparable work. Maybe not a lot better, but certainly typical of what I would have assigned "B" to. Upon self-reflection/assessment. Most students took the "A," but two or three downgraded to a "B" (1 justified, 1 acceptable, 1 who probably should have taken the "A").

2) What kind of writing was produced? Mostly comfortable. I hoped that the possibilities of unlimited topic and form would push them; it did not. I suspect that the newness of the contract precluded this. I also suspect that the state-mandated portfolios which included poetry and fiction, influenced the decision of many to include these comfortable pieces.

Concluding Assumptions

I hoped that contracts would a) put the burden on the student and b) allow the students to concentrate on writing. Both of these were met with some success. After the grade was out of the way, students wrote mostly about the kinds of things which made them more as people living in a world where car accidents, illness, etc. keep them from doing the serious work we often want of them—with the disappointment when they fail to produce. Students could have worked hard and produced better papers, but all in all most tried, did what they could, and were satisfied.

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